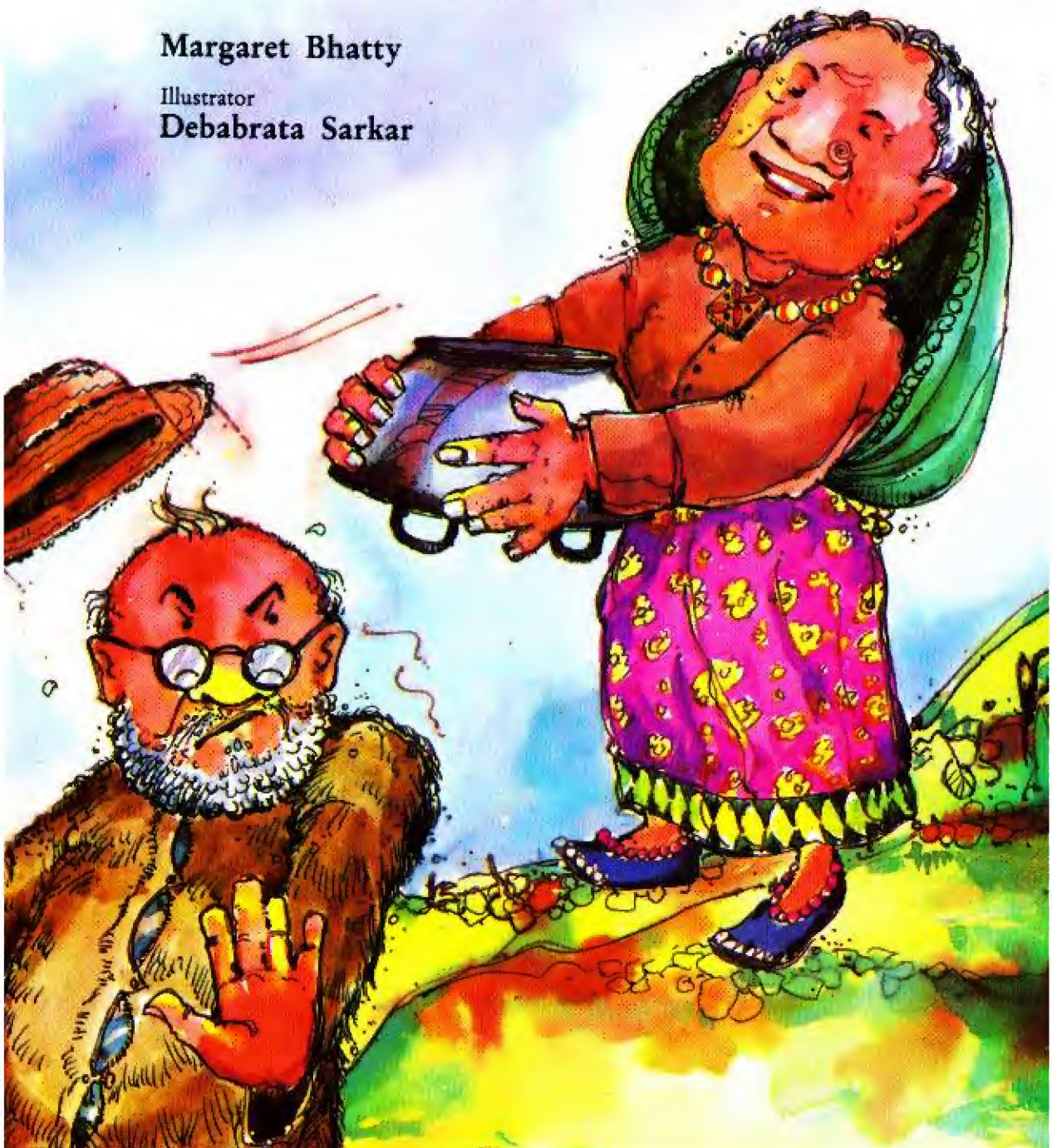




L I T T L E O L D W O M A N

Margaret Bhatt

Illustrator
Debabrata Sarkar





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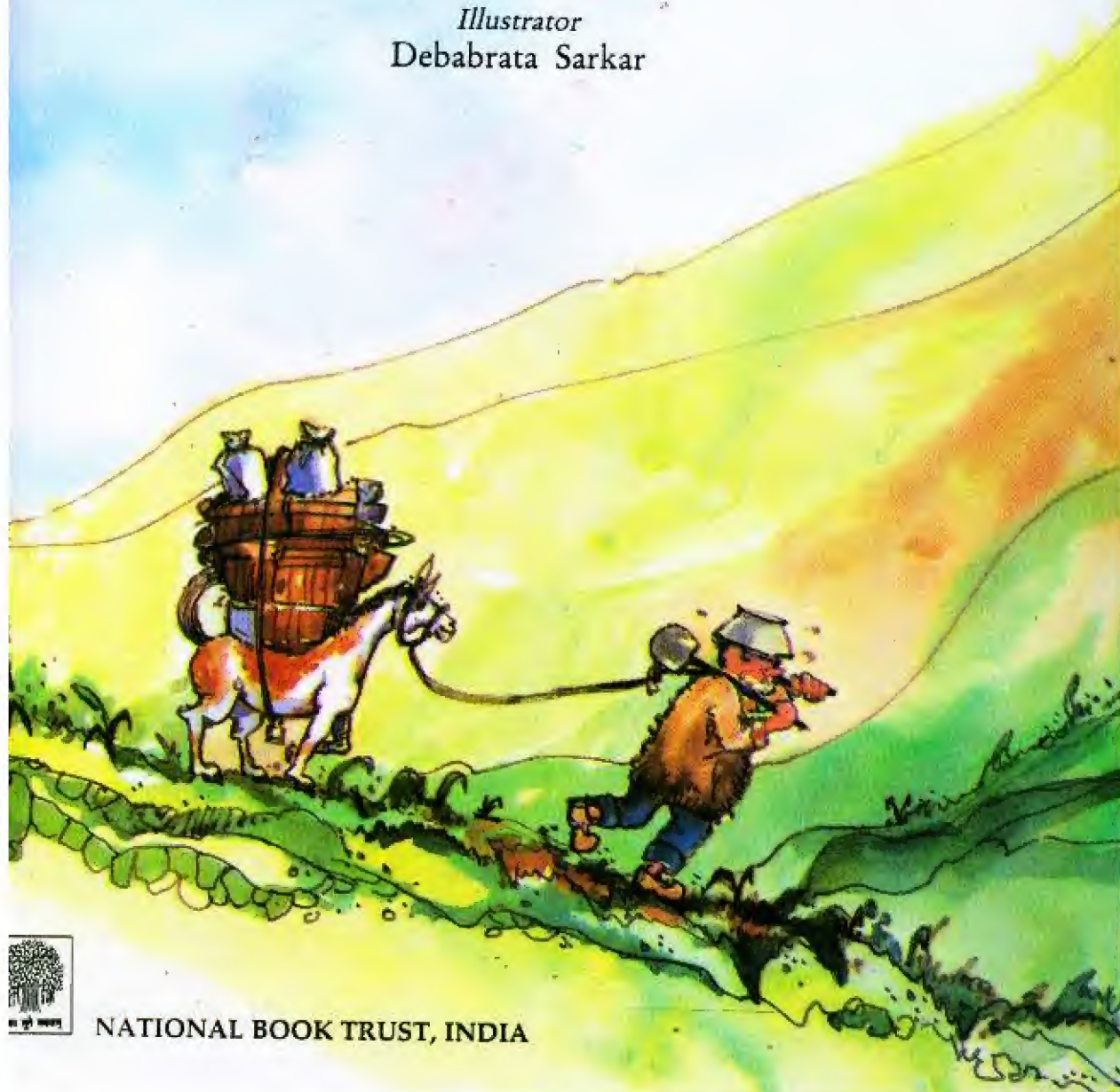
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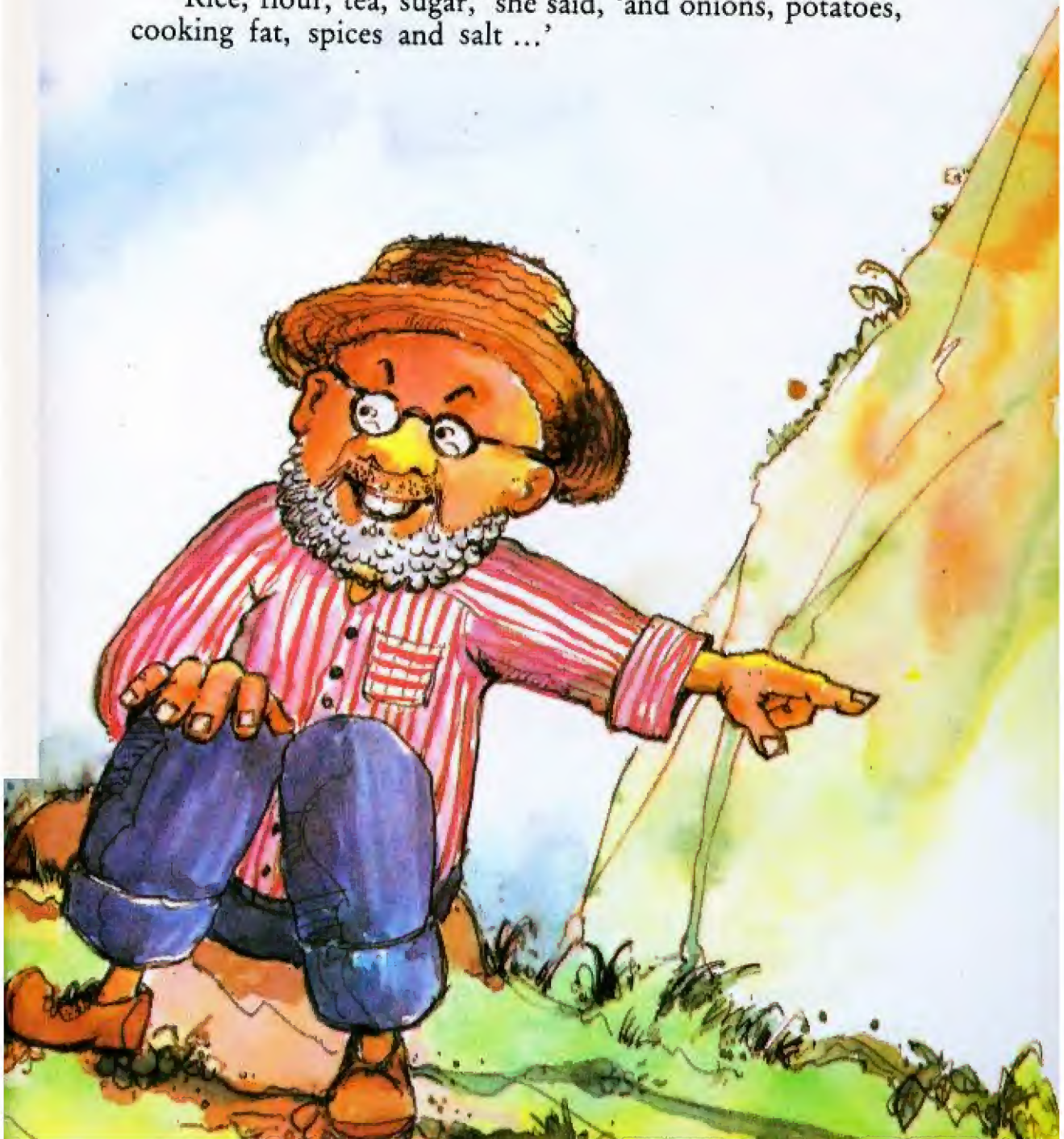


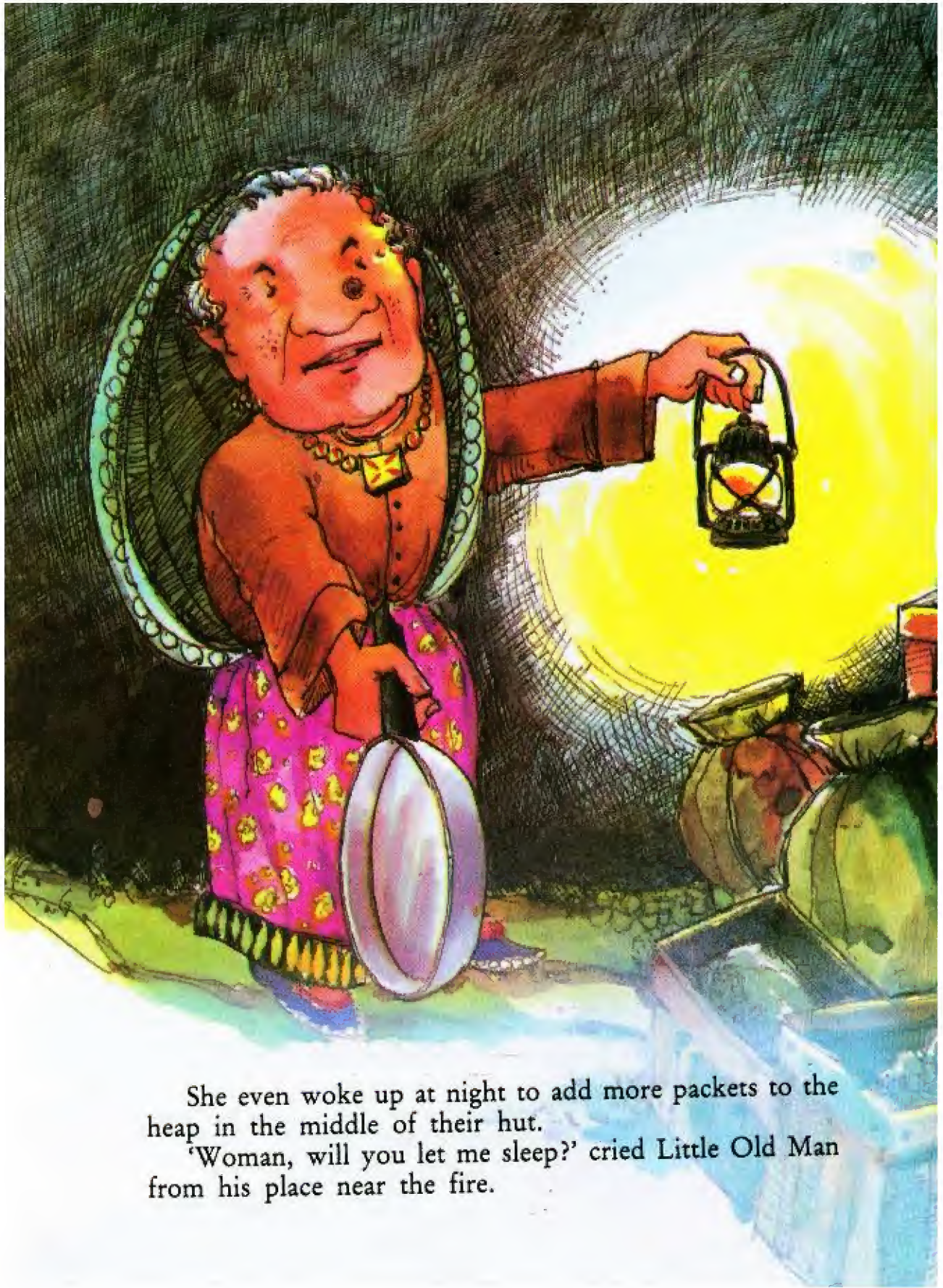
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When Little Old Man said, 'I think I'll go down the mountain and buy sheep,' Little Old Woman started worrying about packing. 'He's never ever left home. Now he'll be tramping with Little Old Horse for twelve whole days.'

'Rice, flour, tea, sugar,' she said, 'and onions, potatoes, cooking fat, spices and salt ...'



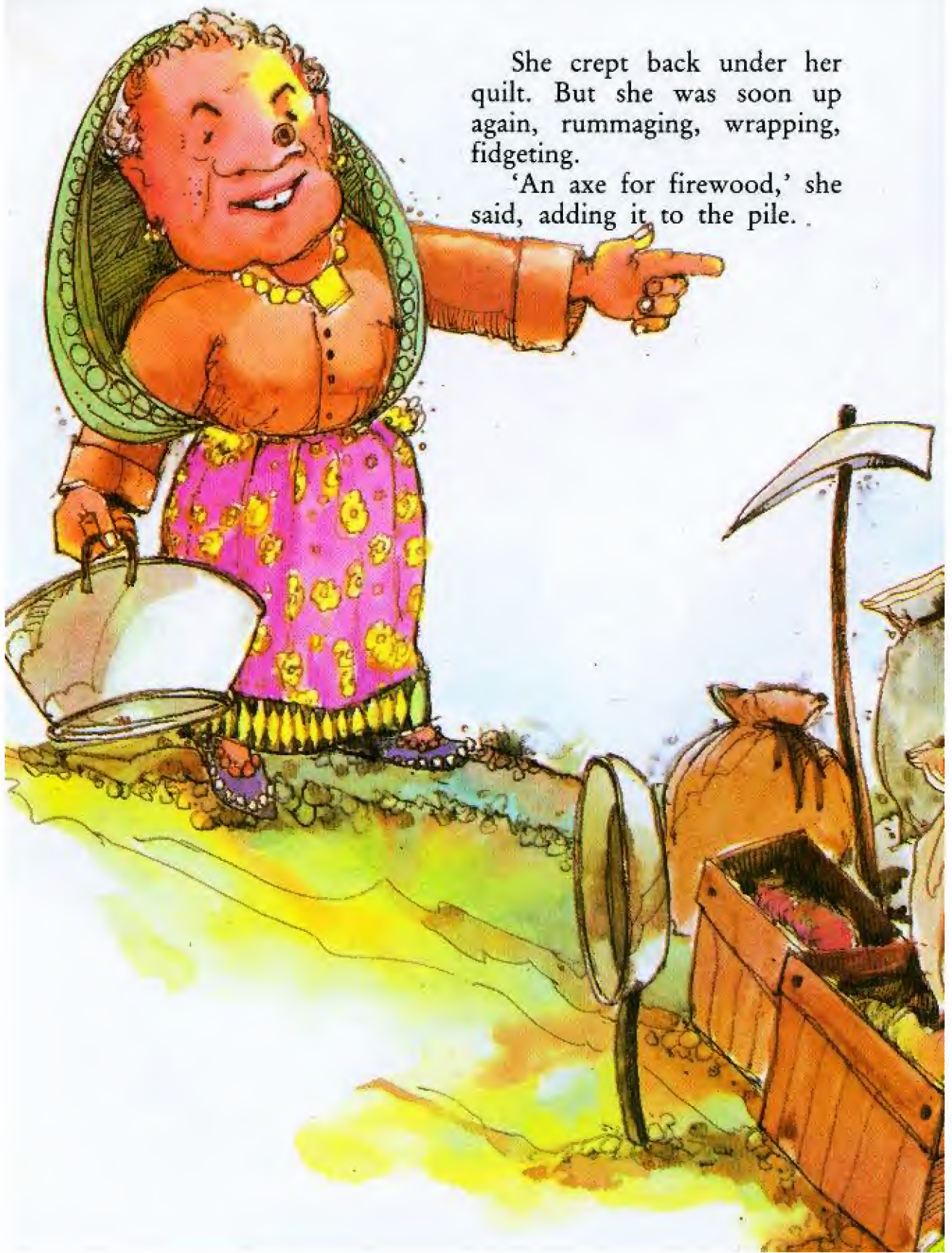


She even woke up at night to add more packets to the heap in the middle of their hut.
'Woman, will you let me sleep?' cried Little Old Man from his place near the fire.



She crept back under her quilt. But she was soon up again, rummaging, wrapping, fidgeting.

'An axe for firewood,' she said, adding it to the pile.



'Or for fighting off a black Himalayan bear,' he said in a quivering voice.

'Like Uncle Jigme,' said she. 'He got clawed on his chest when he went down the mountain to buy sheep.'

Now Little Old Man couldn't sleep either.

'Maybe I shouldn't go,' said he.

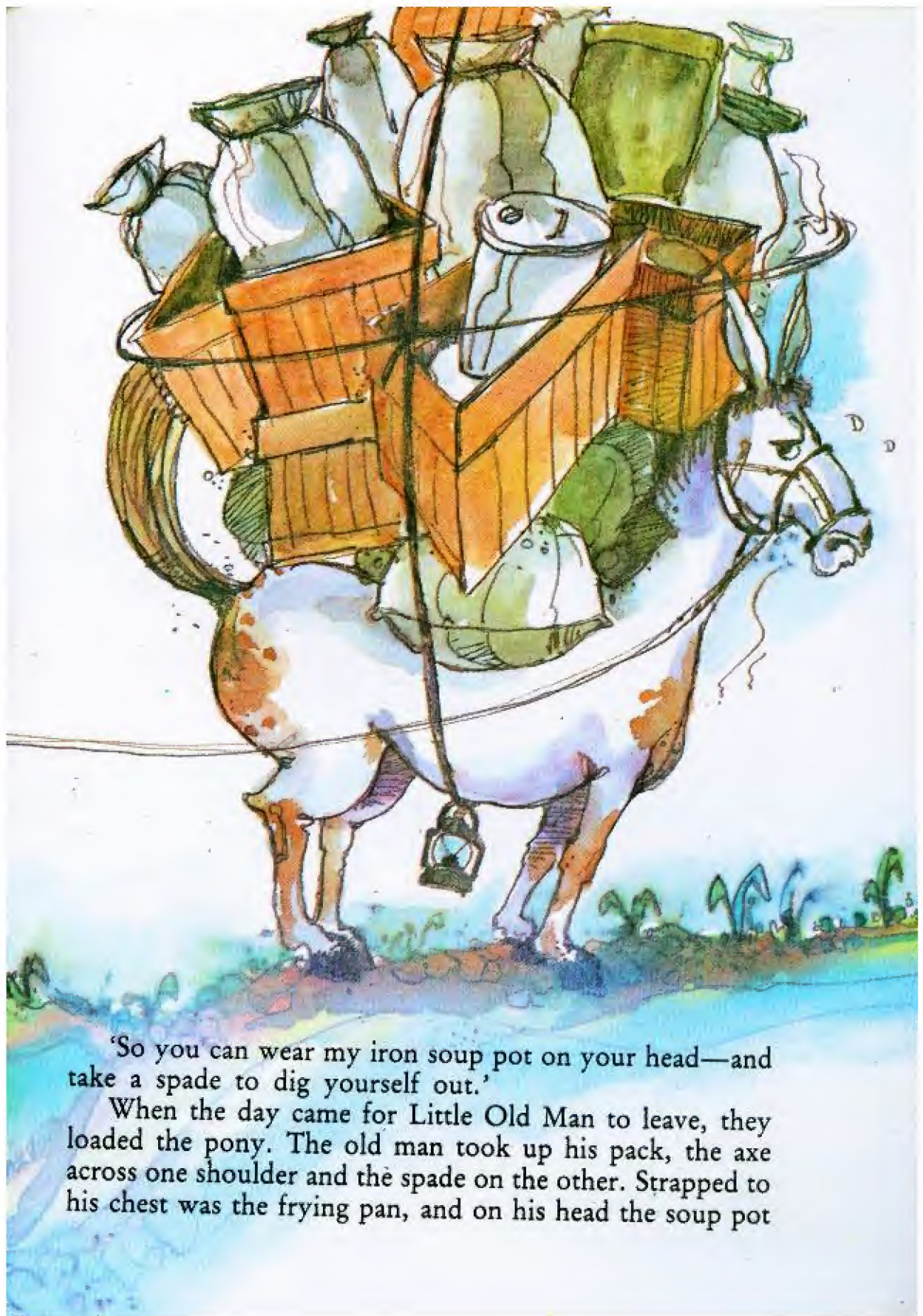




'Nonsense! You can strap on my iron frying pan under your sheepskin jacket.'

'D'you remember Cousin Dorjee?' he asked. 'He got killed by a rock in an avalanche when he went down the mountain to buy sheep.'





'So you can wear my iron soup pot on your head—and take a spade to dig yourself out.'

When the day came for Little Old Man to leave, they loaded the pony. The old man took up his pack, the axe across one shoulder and the spade on the other. Strapped to his chest was the frying pan, and on his head the soup pot



which came over his ears. He peered out from under the rim as he led the pony down the mountain road. Their knees wobble-wobbled under the weight they carried.

Half a mile down they heard a shout. 'Stop! Stop!' It was Little Old Woman running behind. 'Flint stones!' she panted, catching up. 'To start your campfire, and here—your umbrella. It always rains in the Pass. You'll freeze if you get wet.'



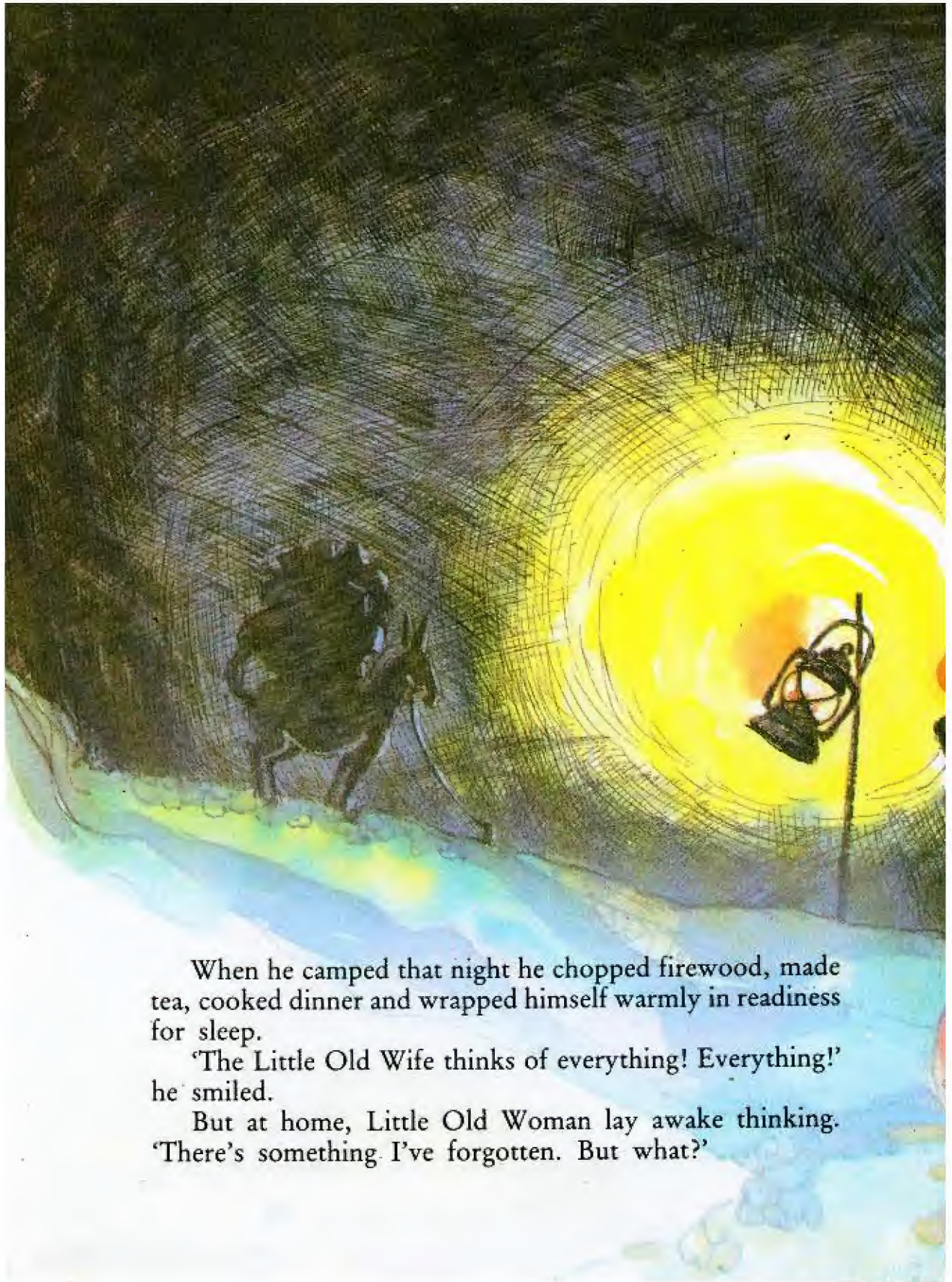


She hooked it on to the back of his collar. 'I've still forgotten something! But what?'

'Better not remember,' he said from under her soup pot. 'One more thing to carry and I'll drop dead.'

'Go then! And be sure to offer salt to the Spirits of the Mountain before the Pass, or they'll be angry.'

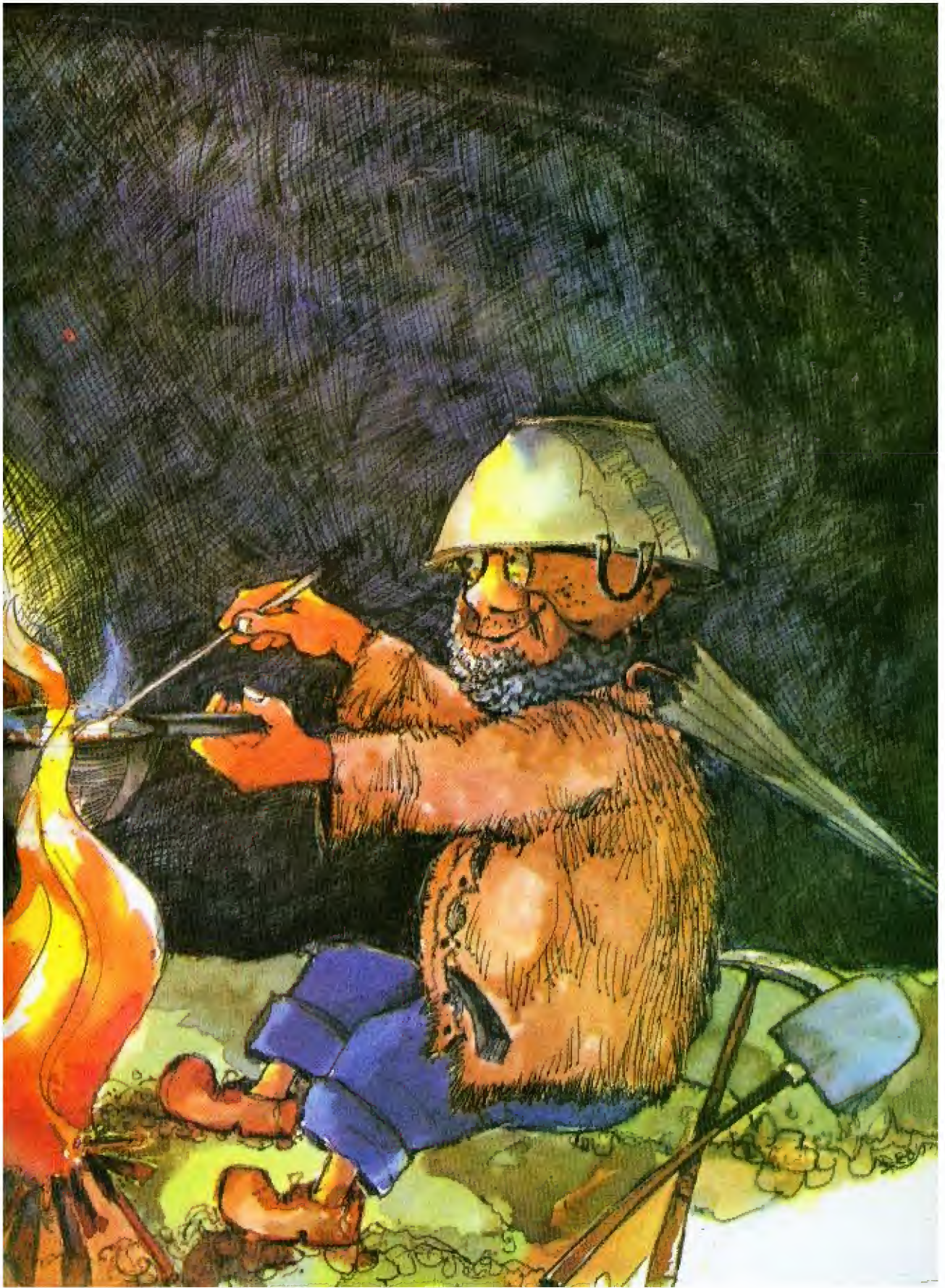




When he camped that night he chopped firewood, made tea, cooked dinner and wrapped himself warmly in readiness for sleep.

'The Little Old Wife thinks of everything! Everything!' he smiled.

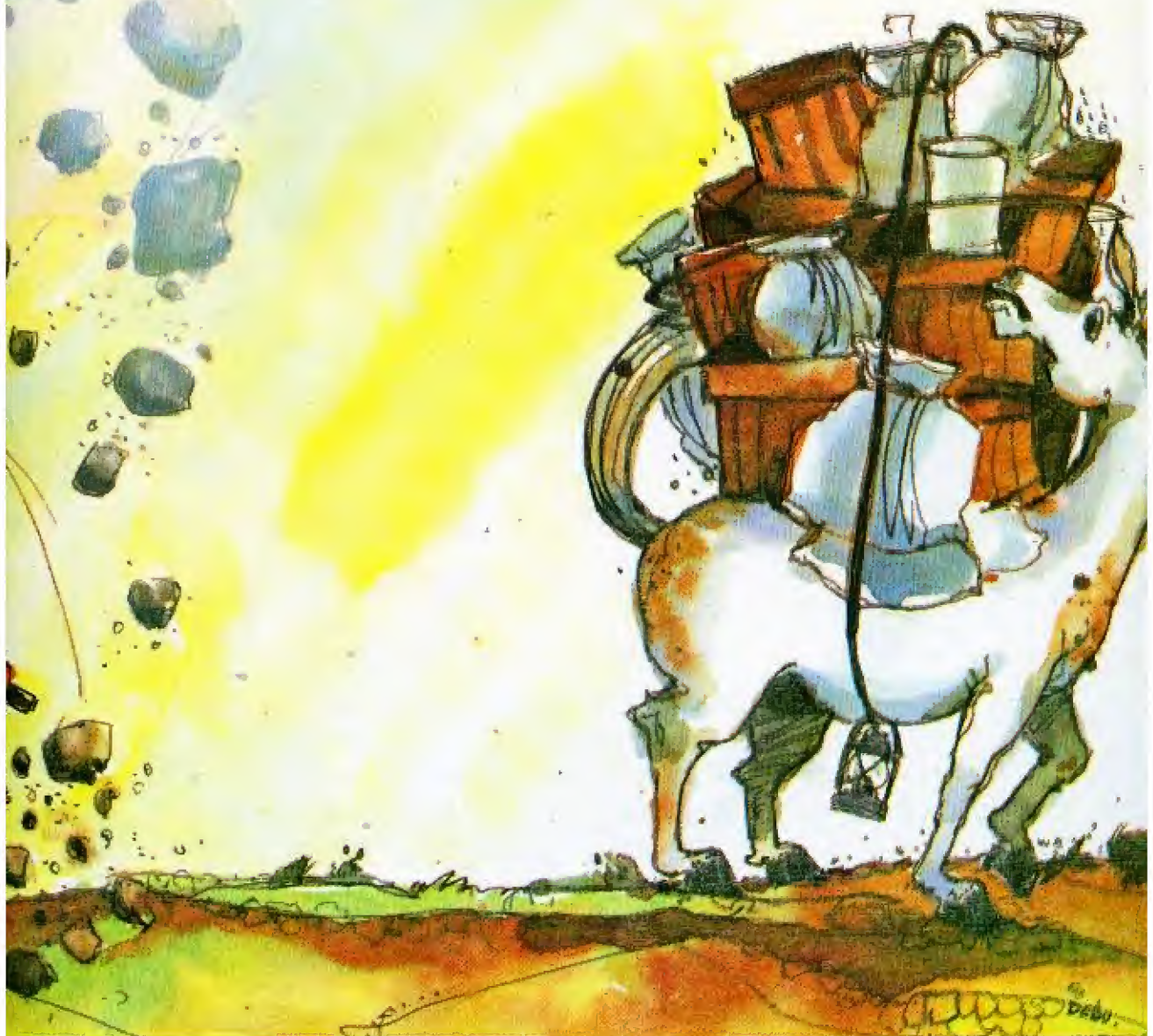
But at home, Little Old Woman lay awake thinking. 'There's something I've forgotten. But what?'





On the second day Little Old Man met his avalanche right after his pony had crossed safely. *Whooosh!* Down came heaps of muddy snow carrying stones of every size.

Clunk! thunk! tinkle! tic-tac! boom! tuk! crash! they went, bouncing off Little Old Woman's soup pot and making his head ring. He easily dug himself out and tramped on, unhurt.







The third day he met his Himalayan bear.

Aargh! Arf! it snarled, charging at him.

Little Old Man's knees turned to water. He tried to *Whump! Thump!* at the bear with his axe but he couldn't do much for his arms seemed like rubber. Because of his heavy

pack the bear easily tumbled him on to his back.
'Now I'll end up like poor Uncle Jigme,' he thought,
half-fainting. 'Goodbye Little Old Wife!'





But the bear couldn't get a bite out of him. It broke its nails on the Old Woman's frying pan, and its teeth on her soup pot, and ran away in disgust.



On the fourth day the Little Old Man and his horse came to a swift river. Two pine trees with rough planks across made a bridge. The planks were old. They broke under the weight of Little Old Man and his over-loaded horse. Both fell through and were swept away.



High on 'the mountain, Little Old Woman asked every traveller who came up the road, 'Did you pass my Little Old Husband and his horse?'

'Yes,' said one. 'Just after he'd dug himself out of an avalanche without a scratch.'

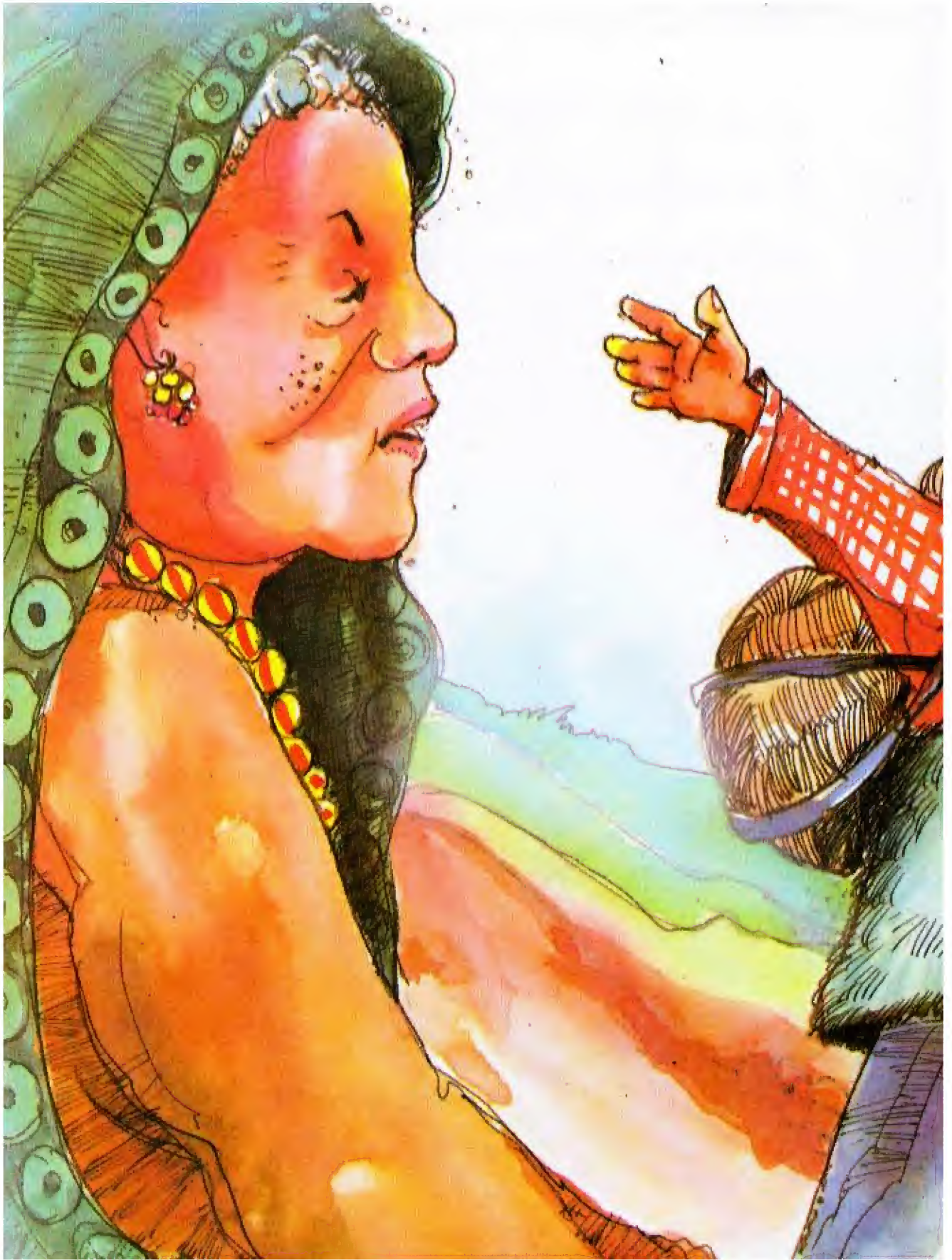
'Yes,' said another. 'Just after he'd fought with a black bear and broken all its nails and teeth.'

'Yes,' said a third. 'Just before the Pass. He was offering salt to the Spirits of the Mountain.'

'Yes,' said a fourth. 'Going through the Pass. It was raining buckets, but he was nice and dry.'







'No,' said the last traveller. 'I didn't pass them. But I saw two big holes in the bridge. One was shaped like your Little Old Man and the other like his Little Old Horse!'





'Oh! Oh!' she wailed. 'They fell into the river and they can't swim! Now I know what I forgot!'

And she brought out four sheepskin bladders, filled with air, with which to cross rivers. 'Too late! Too late!' she wept.

Several days passed. One night, as Little Old Woman sat sadly by her fire, she heard a faint scrabbling at her door.







There stood Little Old Man, cold, tired and very hungry.
Little Old Woman was overjoyed.

When he'd rested and eaten he told his story. 'My heavy pack got jammed between two boulders in the river. I'd still be there if some shepherds hadn't rescued me. But our old pony is lost.'

'With these sheepskin bladders you could have floated,' she said.

'Ha! If you hadn't loaded us up we wouldn't have fallen through in the first place!'

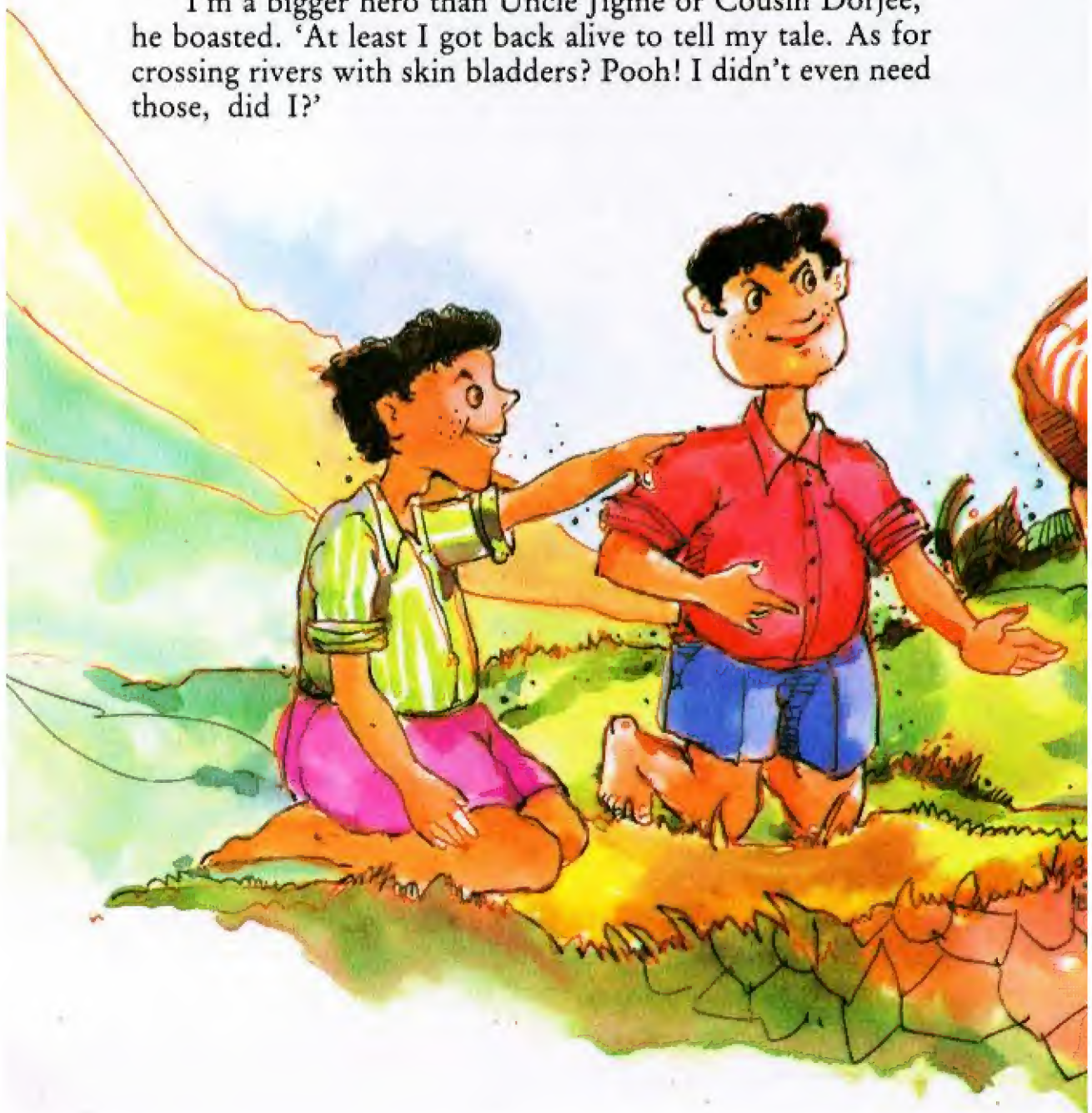
'Ha! If you hadn't carried all those things you wouldn't

even have got as far as the bridge,' she cried. 'And—ha! If your pack hadn't been so big, you wouldn't have been saved by those two boulders!'

And thus they argued for the rest of their lives.

There was no more talk of going down the mountain to buy sheep. Little Old Man had travelled enough. Instead, he told the village children of his adventures.

'I'm a bigger hero than Uncle Jigme or Cousin Dorjee,' he boasted. 'At least I got back alive to tell my tale. As for crossing rivers with skin bladders? Pooh! I didn't even need those, did I?'







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